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Cover  
*Binding from a vakfiye (endowment deed)*  
Turkey, nineteenth century  
Leather, embossed and gilt  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Edwin  
Binney, 3rd, Turkish Collection  
M.85.237.59



# *Music for the Eyes*

An Introduction to Islamic and Ottoman Calligraphy



MOHAMED ZAKARIYA

# “Read!”

That exhortation was the first word of God's revelation to the Prophet Muhammad. Ever since, the written word has held a position of primacy in the Islamic religion. The divine revelation is called the Qur'an, which in written form is about the length of the New Testament. It is considered to be the direct word of God, preserved in Heaven and transmitted to Muhammad over a period of some twenty years. Beautiful writing—calligraphy—celebrates the sounds and meanings of this sacred text and preserves its accuracy.

To write the Qur'an is an act of religious devotion and merit. In this act we can witness the continuity of revelation, from the ancient Hebrew scribes to the biblical copyists of monastic Europe to the calligraphers of Islam. In the deepest sense they would have understood each other, linking, as they do, these three religious traditions in their search for authenticity, truth, and beauty.

The Arabic language was at once the vehicle for the revelation, the language of the first Muslims in Arabia, and the lingua franca of all learned Muslims throughout the Islamic world. From the early days of Islam, Arabic, the language of the revelation, was believed to have a sacred nature, and this belief was influential in the development of Arabic script. The act of writing and the written word were thought to have a divinely inspired power. It was only natural, then, that writing should develop into the preeminent visual art form of Islam. Writing, especially calligraphy, became a kind of worship, a religious event that one prepared for as for prayer. For serious or religious art, pictorial representation was irrelevant or even abhorrent. In stylized form, however, representation has been ubiquitous in Islamic manuscript illustration, ceramics, sculpture, metalwork, woodwork, and textiles.

All literate cultures have some form of calligraphic art, although the status of that art varies with the culture. Printing came late to the Islamic world, arriving in the eighteenth century; until that time scribal writing was universal. Printing liberated calligraphy from the drudgery of scribalism, freeing calligraphers to concentrate their talents on art rather than simple text.

In the Islamic world, of course, calligraphy had always been as much an art as an occupation, and men of letters delighted in coining phrases to describe it. “If it was a flower,” one early writer said of calligraphy, “it would be a rose; if a metal, gold.” Another said, “The pen is the ambassador of intelligence, the messenger of thought, and the interpreter for the mind.” Perhaps the best of these classical Arabic metaphors is this: “Calligraphy is music for the eyes.”

Words are the raw material of calligraphy, which is never divorced from meaning, but like music, true calligraphy also works on a wordless level, the level on which all great art functions. Together the verbal cooperates with the visual to enhance meaning; or, as another classical maxim puts it, “Calligraphy gives greater clarity to truth.”



For Muslims the function of calligraphy is to support and strengthen the spiritual edifice of faith. The art can be said to be successful if this is its effect; if it diminishes faith, it fails. This is a weighty responsibility, but calligraphy is not a ponderous or brooding art; rather, the finest calligraphy is light and uplifting.

♦♦♦

Though its origins are obscure, the Arabic alphabet predates the Islamic religion by as much as four centuries. By the time of Muhammad (c. 570–632), Arabic script was a practical, though simple, means of writing. Like other Semitic alphabets it is written from right to left. There are nineteen basic letter shapes, including the *lam-alif*, which combines two letters, *L* and *A*. These basic shapes are used to convey a total of twenty-nine letters.

Originally diacritical marks and the short vowels were not written; nor were pronunciation marks such as the *shadda*, the sign for doubling a consonant. As Islam spread from Arabia to non-Arabic-speaking lands, however, this writing system was revised. Dots, or diacritical marks, were added to distinguish different letters that use the same shapes, and pronunciation marks and short vowels began to be used consistently to avoid ambiguity. By 750 the script had been forged into an accurate writing tool and had already acquired aesthetic associations.

The division of Arabic writing into styles or scripts is a crucial factor in the development of calligraphy. At first there were two modes of writing: simple and formal. Simple writing, used for everyday, utilitarian purposes, was soft and fluid, written with a blunt pen. For formal uses a chisel-cut reed pen (i.e., one cut at an angle with a tip of varying widths) gave the writing a consistent thickness of line and proportion, a prerequisite for calligraphy.

As the early Islamic polity grew in power and reach, it became more sophisticated in the ways of statecraft. The original simple script became the trunk from which branched a variety of scripts used in government chanceries (administrative centers), in religious and educational institutions, and for business and personal communication. The formal script evolved simultaneously, and by the middle of the eighth century it had become a stately, balanced script for writing the Qur'an. So it remained until the tenth century. The original name of this formal script is unknown; until the correct nomenclature is discovered, the script (fig. 1) is customarily called Kufi or Kufic, after the city of Kufa, in Iraq.



Figure 1

Page from a manuscript of the Qur'an (17, 111)

Abbasid period, tenth–eleventh century; borders added at a later date  
Formal (*Kufi*) script

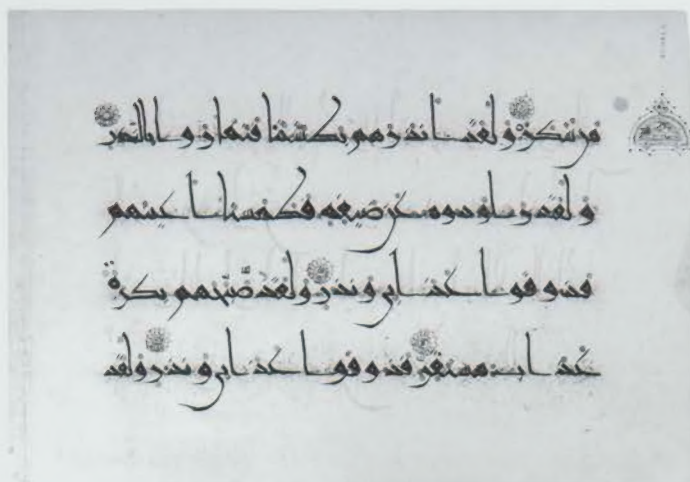
Ink and colors on parchment

4<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 7<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (12.3 x 19.7 cm)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Nasli M. Heeramanek  
Collection, gift of Joan Palevsky, M.73.5.496

*"And say, praise be to God who has not taken for himself a son, and he has  
no partner in his dominion."*

Crudely executed but compositionally excellent



**Figure 2**  
 Page from a manuscript of the  
*Qur'an* (54, 35–39)  
 Iran, eleventh century  
 "New" script  
 Ink, colors, and gold on paper  
 9 1/2 x 13 5/8 in. (24.1 x 33.85 cm)  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
 Rogers Fund, 1940 (40.164.5r)  
 An early paper *Qur'an*, with an  
 early version of the new script  
 (formerly called Eastern Kufic),  
 using the original system of colored  
 dots to indicate vowels

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, one of the oldest surviving Islamic monuments, includes an early calligraphic masterpiece in the form of a magnificent mosaic band of formal script, dating to 691, which stretches around the interior walls. By this early date, calligraphy already had leapt off the page and onto the walls of mosques and other religious buildings, conferring on them an atmosphere of Islamic meaning and sentiment and marking them as specifically sacred spaces.

The Kufi script was gradually supplanted by a script that developed from the chancery scripts. It was used to write the first *Qur'ans* on paper (fig. 2) in the tenth century. Although it used to be called Eastern Kufic, the terms *new style* and *new script* are gaining currency. These terms more accurately reflect the script's novelty and connection with a less formal and grandiose type of writing. In fact, it was to prove to be the bridge between the old formal scripts and the widespread adoption of proportional scripts.

By the beginning of the ninth century, the center of calligraphic activity had moved from Damascus to Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid caliphate and the cultural center of the Islamic world. The Kufi script and new script continued to be used for writing *Qur'ans*, but the other chancery scripts began to receive concentrated attention as well, leading to their development as the progenitors of modern scripts. During the twelfth century, the new script began to be abandoned for copying *Qur'ans*, though it remained in use as an ornamental script. Waiting behind the scenes, as it were, was a new group of scripts, which began to appear in abundance.

Eight of these so-called proportioned scripts were prominent. The names of these scripts were derived from their size or use. They include *tomar*, the giant script used for scrolls; *muhakkak*, which means the fully realized script; *reyhani*, a small *muhakkak*; *sülü*, called the one-third script because it is written with a pen one-third the size of the pen used for *tomar*; *teyki'*, the script used for imperial correspondence; *rika'*, the small version of *teyki'*; *nesih*, the copyist's script; and *gubari*, the microscript



used for, among other things, carrier pigeon mail. Tomar and gubari were gradually sidelined, becoming mere historical curiosities. The remaining six scripts have been the media for Islamic calligraphy ever since.

Three calligraphers from this period, all from Baghdad, are especially significant: Ibn Muqla (d. 940), Ibn al-Bawwab (d. 1022), and Yaqut al-Musta'simi (d. 1298). Though radically different in lives and personalities, each of these men was a landmark figure. Ibn Muqla conceived the idea of proportional measurement, but it was Ibn al-Bawwab who refined and developed this system of measuring and regularizing letters using the dot made by the nib of a chisel-cut pen. This system was refined further by Yaqut, who introduced a new method of trimming the nib of the pen at an oblique angle. Collectively, the three perfected the six styles into a supple, expressive approach to writing, still in use today. This transmission was made possible by a chain of calligraphers beginning with Yaqut's students, who spread his method to the main areas of the Muslim world.

Calligraphers in Iran also worked in the six scripts, following the method of Yaqut. Indeed, Persian calligraphers remained loyal to Yaqut's method in these six styles, and their work gradually became less innovative. The greatest Persian contribution came from a calligrapher named Mir 'Ali Tabrizi (d. c. 1420), who one night dreamed of flying geese. Inspired by this vision, he developed a hybrid script called *nasta'lik* (or *ta'lik* in Ottoman usage). Used primarily for copying Persian poetry, both for compendia and single sheets, *nasta'lik* was often accompanied by sumptuous illuminated decoration (fig. 3). This simple, fluid, and artistically powerful script reached its zenith in Iran at the hands of Mir 'Imad al-Hasani, whose career was cut short when he was assassinated by jealous rivals in 1615.

Many great Persian calligraphers immigrated to India, where they taught and produced works on paper and inscriptions on monuments. Among them were Mir Khalilullah (d. 1626), who was a

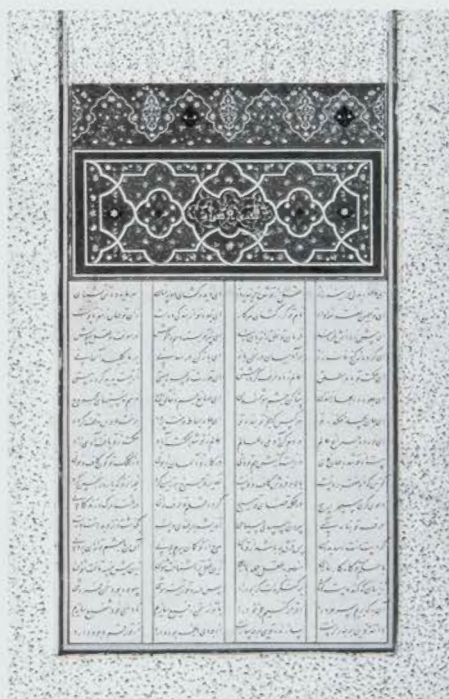


Figure 3

Illuminated opening page from a manuscript of Amir Khusrav Dhillavi's *Majnun u Layli*

Iran, Herat, late fifteenth-early sixteenth century

*Nasta'lik* script

Ink, colors, and gold on paper, with gold-flecked borders

11 1/4 x 7 1/2 in. (29.9 x 19 cm)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by the Nasli M. Heeramanek Collection, gift of Joan Palevsky, AC1992.35.1

A beautiful example of *burde* (small) *ta'lik* (in Ottoman usage) as used in the copying of books

master of *nesta'lik*, and 'Abd al-Haqq of Shiraz, later known as Amanat Khan (d. 1644), who designed the inscriptions for the Taj Mahal. Masters such as these established a tradition that grew into the contemporaneous South Asian school of calligraphy, also noteworthy for its naturalistic border paintings.

Meanwhile, in the Islamic West (the Maghrib, or North Africa and Spain) calligraphy took a different turn. Elements of the original simple, informal script were blended with the new style, producing a powerful and distinctive style of writing that is easy to read and write. The calligraphers of the Maghrib produced scripts of stately magnificence for writing the Qur'an (fig. 4) as well as many scribal scripts for copying books and documents. Perhaps the most remarkable of the late Maghribi calligraphers was the Moroccan Muhammad al-Qandusi, who died in 1861. Maghribi calligraphy remains today a living tradition, often displaying great creativity and vitality.

To the East, the Muslim minority in China devised a totally different way of writing Arabic, using brushes instead of reed pens and taking inspiration from the ancient Chinese calligraphic tradition.

In the heartlands of the Islamic world, however, the calligraphic arts had reached stasis by the fifteenth century. Fine work was done, but the fire of invention had dimmed. Illumination was exquisite but predictable, a stereotype of blue and

gold. Calligraphy was still the king of Islamic art, but like many kings, it had grown cautious. Self-satisfied, it asked little of its practitioners and patrons.

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After the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by the Ottomans, that city (later known as Istanbul) became the capital, as well as the religious and cultural center of the expanding Ottoman Empire. With the encouragement of the new state, the arts too began to flourish in Istanbul as nowhere else at that time.

The torch of Islamic calligraphy had, in effect, been passed to the Ottomans, and two contemporary calligraphers were to decide the fate of the art.

Around 1480, a fifty-year-old calligrapher named Şeyh Hamdullah (1429–1520) had a visionary experience that led him to redesign completely the



Figure 4  
Page from a manuscript of the Qur'an (78, 20–25)  
Spain, twelfth century  
Maghribi script  
Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on parchment  
10<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (27 x 26.7 cm)  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided  
by the Nasli M. Heeramanek Collection, gift of Joan Palevsky; M.88.37  
The vowel system is the Western (Maghribi) hybrid type using colors  
to vocalize the Imam Warsh system of pronunciation and recitation.





Figure 5  
Şeyh Hamdullah (1429–1520)  
Two kut'as from an album  
Turkey, Istanbul, fifteenth–sixteenth century  
Sülüs and nesih scripts  
Ink, colors, and gold on paper mounted on  
cardboard  
Each kut'a 8 1/4 x 11 1/8 in. (21.4 x 30 cm)  
Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul

structure of the six scripts, especially sülüs and nesih, which became the Ottoman scripts par excellence (fig. 5). With the encouragement of his friend and mentor Sultan Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512), he forever changed calligraphy and the way we look at it. Studying the work of older masters, he sifted and tested to find the best letter shapes and invented a system of imaginary slanted horizon lines along which to arrange each letter, imparting motion, tension, and energy to the writing. He also refined the measurements of the letters and regularized the spacing between letters and words, giving the text a more open, regular feel. Şeyh Hamdullah's reforms provided a critical tool for distinguishing good calligraphy from bad.

At around the same time, the young Ahmed Karahisari (d. 1556) brought the style of writing developed in Baghdad by Yaqt al-Musta'îmi to its apex. Karahisari outlived Şeyh Hamdullah by thirty-six years, but it was Şeyh Hamdullah's style that would prevail.

In the Ottoman teaching tradition, knowledge was passed on face to face, from teacher to student. In a practice called *taklid*, or imitation, students copied the *meşks*, or lessons, written for them by their teachers (fig. 6). After completing these studies successfully, a student received a document called an *icazetname* (fig. 7), in essence enrolling the novice in the ranks of the *battats* (professional calligraphers).



**Figure 6**  
Mehmed Şevki Efendi (1829–1887)  
*Murakkaa*  
Turkey, Istanbul, A.D. 1863/  
A.H. 1280  
Sülüs and nesih scripts  
Ink, colors, and gold on paper  
mounted on cardboard  
6 1/2 x 10 1/4 in. (16.5 x 25.7 cm)  
Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul  
This *meşk* or group of exercises  
is known as *müfredat meşki* (single-  
and double-letter exercises).  
Top line: "Lord, make things easy  
and not difficult. Make things turn  
out well."  
Bottom line: first part of the  
alphabet

Most Ottoman calligraphers were teachers, and the Ottoman teaching tradition allowed their influence to spread like ripples on a pond. Among the most notable were Şeyh Hamdullah; Hafız Osman Efendi (d. 1698); İsmail Zühdi Efendi (d. 1806); his brother, Mustafa Rakım Efendi (d. 1826; fig. 8); Mahmud Celaledin Efendi (d. 1829); Kadiasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi (d. 1876; fig. 9); and Mehmed Şevki Efendi (d. 1887). These were the founding artists of the Ottoman method for the six scripts, of which only sülüs, nesih, and rika' were used extensively.

The large sülüs script, known as *celi sülüs*, is essentially the invention of Mustafa Rakım Efendi, whose reforms salvaged monumental writing from rigidity and stasis and made it viable.

Kadiasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi, a religious and legal thinker, musician, and composer as well as a calligrapher (fig. 10), designed the largest pieces of calligraphy in the world: the twenty-three-foot roundels executed in gold in the Ayasofya mosque in Istanbul.

The Ottomans achieved a new version of *nesta'lik* at the hands of Mehmed Es'ad Yesari Efendi (d. 1798). Born paralyzed on his right side and palsied on his left, Yesari Efendi nevertheless excelled in



**Figure 7**  
Necmeddin Okyay (1883–1976)  
Sami Efendi (1838–1912)  
*İcazetname*  
Turkey, Istanbul, A.D. 1912/A.H. 1322  
Ta'lik script  
Ink, colors, and gold on paper  
11 1/8 x 7 1/4 in. (28.9 x 19.8 cm)  
Derman Collection, Istanbul  
The *icazet* in ta'lik script was granted to Necmeddin Okyay from his teacher, Sami Efendi. Poem in Persian by Necmeddin Okyay; *icazet* text in Arabic: "I allow the writer of this work, Master Necmeddin Efendi, to sign his works. May God prolong his life and knowledge. I am his teacher, Sami. May God forgive their sins."



# Meşk

*Meşk* is the classical Islamic way of teaching calligraphy. (In music education auditory teaching études are also called *meşk*). Copying the *meşks* is called *taklid* and ensures that the student masters the foundations and basic standards of the art before becoming a professional. Teaching is done one on one, teacher to student. The teacher writes the *meşk* while the student watches. The student practices the *meşk*, prepares a new one, and takes it to the teacher for correction and advice. The student then practices this new material, and the work continues in this manner until the teacher allows the student to progress to the next lesson. There are usually between thirteen and seventeen different *meşk* exercises in the basic group of lessons called the *müfredat*. Examples 1–3 (shown here) are the first lessons for each of the “six scripts.” After finishing the *müfredat*, the student learns the composition of words and lines by studying and writing the compound exercises known as the *mürekkabat*. Successful completion of both parts of the program allows the student to become professional, and he or she receives an *icazet* (permission, license) from his or her teacher in the form of an *icazetname*. It usually takes from three to ten years to master the material.

The proportion of the letters relative to each other is achieved via the use of dots made by the same pen as the writing, here in red. The “setting” of the letters is demonstrated with the diagonal lines.

One may sample this method of writing by cutting a simple pen from bamboo. A good pen can be made from the bamboo handle of a Chinese art brush by cutting off the hair end and carving carefully. Pens can be cut so that the edge is wider for the big scripts and narrower for the small scripts. The vowels used on the big scripts are added with a very narrow pen. The vowels on the small scripts are added with the pen used for writing consonants.

The fourth *meşk* shown here is an example of a *mürekkabat* exercise. The two lines of *sülüs* script are in Ottoman Turkish and represent an ethical poem: “Abstain from observing the faults of others/so that the True God may conceal your own faults.”

The lines in *nesih* script are in Arabic and comprise a traditional saying:

*The art of calligraphy is hidden  
in the teaching of a master,  
much practice is its foundation,  
and its existence depends on  
the religion of Islam.*

Each of these *meşks* is in the format called a *kit'a*.

فَوَيْلٌ لِلَّذِينَ هُمْ عَنْ صَلَاتِهِمْ سَاهُونَ

لَا يَخَفُونَ سَخَا بَعْضِهِمْ غِلًّا بَعْضِهِمْ

تَسْتَخْرِفُونَ وَيَسْتَلْجِجُونَ

فَكُلٌّ فِي أَفْئَادِهِمْ



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Example 2. majhdat

Large script: 'madi'

Small script: 'madi'

اَللّٰهُمَّ صَلِّ وَسَلِّمْ عَلَىٰ سَيِّدِنَا مُحَمَّدٍ

وَعَلَىٰ اٰلِهِ وَسَلَّمَ

وَعَلَىٰ كُلِّ نَبِيٍّ وَاٰلٍ وَاٰلِهِ وَسَلَّمَ

وَعَلَىٰ كُلِّ نَبِيٍّ وَاٰلٍ وَاٰلِهِ وَسَلَّمَ



فَارْعَا عِبَادَكَ بِمَدِينَتِكَ

الْحِطُّ مُحْيِيٌّ فِي تَغْيِيرِ الْإِسْتِثْنَاءِ وَفَوْادَةٌ فِي كَثْرَةِ الْمَشَقِّ

وَدَوَامُهُ عَلَى دِينِ الْإِسْتِثْنَاءِ كَتَبَهُ مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ يَكَّا ١٤١٩

تَاكِيكَ بِمَدِينَتِكَ بِمَدِينَتِكَ

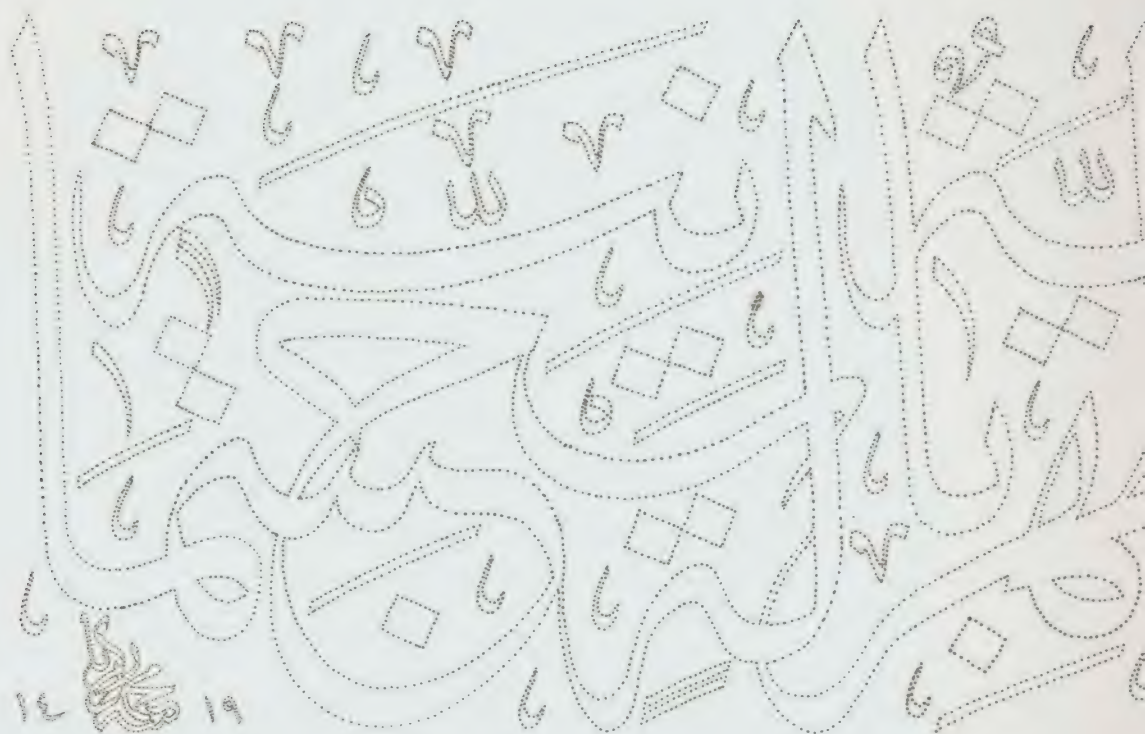
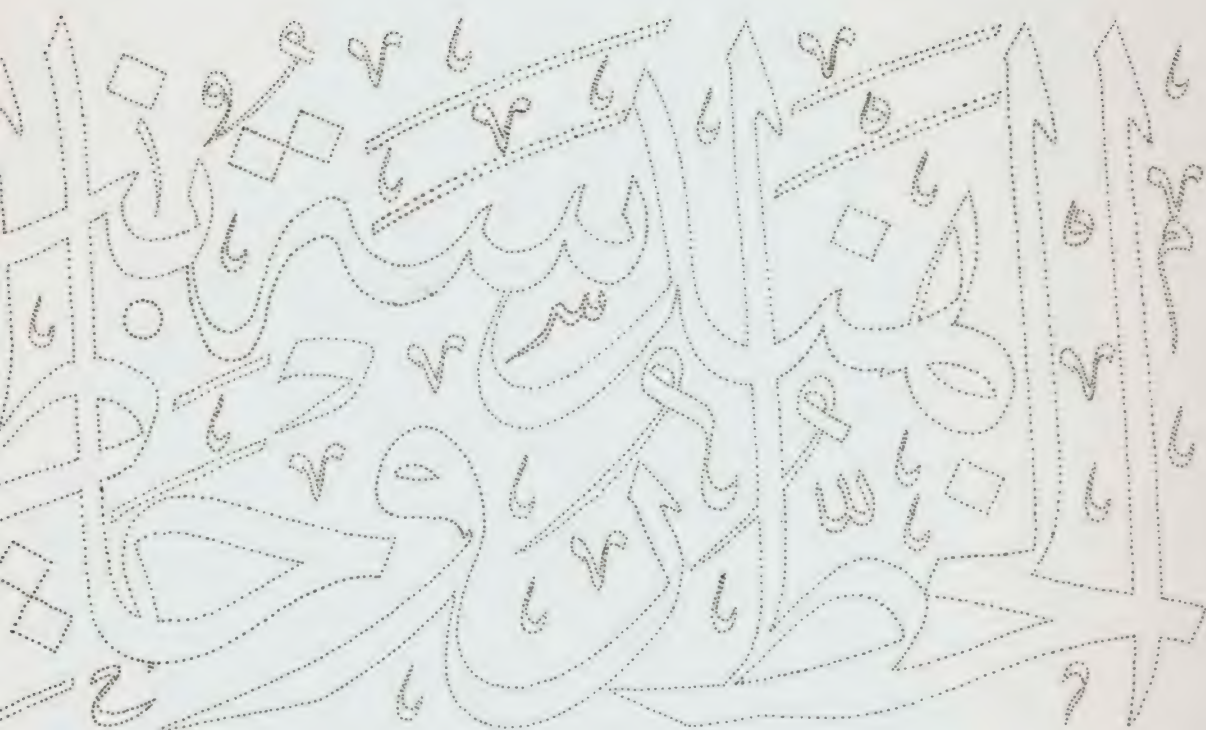


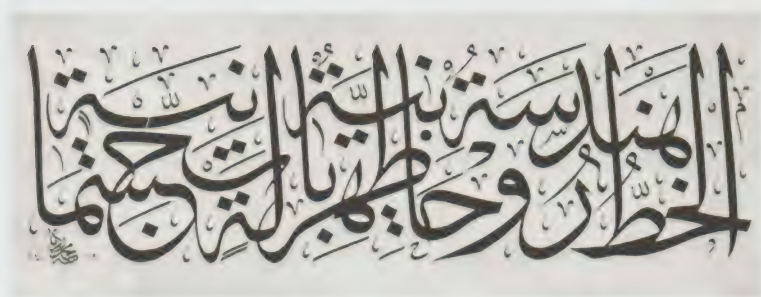
Figure B  
Kalp of fig. A.





# Kalip

Figure A  
Calligraphy from which the  
kalip (fig. B) is derived.



The *kalip* is a stencil that the calligrapher makes to reproduce a large work on another surface in *celi sülüs*, like this example, or *celi ta'lik*. The calligrapher first composes and writes the work freehand and corrects it until the desired result is obtained. In earlier days, this would be done with orpiment ink (arsenic) on black paper. Then the calligrapher puts one or more sheets of heavy paper under the work and pierces the edges of all the letters with a strong needle, also piercing holes in the sheets of paper beneath the original. The papers underneath, pierced with holes, are the stencils. One of them is placed over the desired surface—special paper, painted cardboard, or marble—and the pattern is transferred by pouncing with charcoal dust or, if the surface is dark, with chalk powder. The calligrapher or illuminator then either follows the dots with pens exactly the size and cut of the originals or outlines each letter with a fine pen and fills in the letter with a brush. If gold is used, the process is called *zer-endud*. The charcoal dots are brushed off after the application of gold or ink.

In the example produced here, (fig. B) the *kalip* has been prepared in printed dots. To reproduce the calligraphy, one can either place the *kalip* over several thicknesses of paper and pierce these dots with a needle (sewing machine needles set in handles work well), or place a sheet of tracing paper over the *kalip* and trace the design using the dots as a guide. An ink pen, a small brush, or even a marker can be used to reproduce the work. One should aim to make the line go through the middle of the dots [Θ]. The calligrapher's signature and date appear in the lower-left corner, in the place usually reserved for this purpose in the composition. This composition is in the format called a *levha*, or large panel.

The Arabic text contains part of a saying about calligraphy, usually attributed to the great thirteenth-century master Yaqut al-Musta'ṣimi: "Calligraphy is a spiritual geometry, manifested by a material instrument."





Figure 8  
 Mustafa Rakım Efendi (1758–1826)  
*Levha*  
 Istanbul, Turkey, after 1800  
*Celîsulus* script  
 Gold on painted cloth  
 (57/1 x 22 1/2 x 16; 14 x 26 cm)  
 Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul  
 "There is no divinity except God. He is my Lord and the Lord of the  
 universe. Muhammad is my prophet. May peace be upon him."



Figure 9  
 Kadıasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi (1801–1876)  
*Kıra*  
 Istanbul, Turkey, A.D. 1871/A.H. 1288  
*Sadli* and *Irith* scripts  
 Ink, colors, and gold on paper mounted  
 on cardboard  
 8 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. (21.5 x 26 cm)  
 Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul  
 Top line, *badii* (saying of the Prophet  
 Muhammad): "God has bestowed sainthood  
 on my community."  
 Bottom line: "Let those who would rely  
 upon God" (Qur'an 104: 11)



Figure 10  
Kadıasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi  
*Zer-endud levha*  
Istanbul, Turkey, A.D. 1862/A.H. 1279  
*Celi sülüs* script  
Gold on paper  
15 1/4 x 35 1/8 in. (38.5 x 90 cm)  
Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul  
"He [God] is the First and the Last, and the  
Manifest and the Hidden." (Qūr'ān: 57, 3)

that script, which was perfected by his son Yesarizade Mustafa İzzet Efendi (d. 1849). Yesarizade also perfected the large version of the script, *celi ta'lik*, and his work is still studied by calligraphers today. The great Sami Efendi (d. 1912) was an exponent of this style;

his works in the *zer-endud* (gold-painted) method are world famous. Sami was the teacher of Necmeddin Okyay (d. 1976), who taught Ali Alparslan, the last living exponent of the style.

When the Latin alphabet replaced the Arabic in Turkey in 1928, five centuries of achievement were seemingly brought to a close, but a dedicated group of Turkish artists managed to keep the art alive. Among them were Hamid Aytac (d. 1982) and Necmeddin Okyay. Hasan Çelebi, Hamid Aytac's most successful student, is among the leading lights of the expanding calligraphy scene today, one of a number of calligraphers, illuminators, and makers of marbled paper who strive to bring the art to a growing audience.

Outside Turkey and Morocco, the present state of the art is problematic. In many places calligraphy has been demoted from the status of art and pressed into service for sign painting and advertising or for political purposes. Experiments with computerized calligraphy have, with few exceptions, produced unimpressive results. And although some artists have produced interesting work incorporating letters or words, the writing is not a vehicle for meaning and so cannot be considered calligraphy.

A hopeful direction has been taken by the Research Center for Islamic History, Art, and Culture (IRCICA) in Istanbul, which established a triennial international calligraphy competition in 1985. The competition has attracted entries from around the world, encouraging aspiring calligraphers, offering them constructive criticism, and reinforcing the high standards necessary for the perpetuation of the art.





Calligraphy cannot be appreciated without an understanding of the tools and techniques of the art. Chief among the calligrapher's tools is the *kalem*, or reed pen (fig. 11). Specially grown and seasoned river or marsh reeds produce a light, yet strong stalk that the calligrapher cuts to his or her own specifications. The size of the tip determines the size of the script, and different scripts require tips of different angles. For tiny scripts calligraphers often use so-called Java pens, whose tips are made from the hard thorn of an Indonesian palm. The largest pens, used for the large celi scripts, are carved from wood.

Ink (*mürekkebi*) is made of specially prepared soot, which is mixed with dense gum arabic and ground for more than thirty hours before thinning with water. The ink is kept in an inkwell (*bokka*) within which is an absorbent wad of raw silk called a *lika*, which holds the ink. Pens and ink may be carried in special containers called *kuburs* or *divits*.

Paper is put through a complex process of dying, sizing, burnishing, and aging to prepare it for calligraphy. To aid in laying out the text, the calligrapher puts the paper on a *mistar*, a cardboard panel strung with evenly spaced threads, and presses with the index finger, leaving faintly visible raised lines on the paper. The art of marbling paper (*ebru*) was developed as a way of decorating the borders of calligraphic works. In making marbled paper, one or more colors are floated on the surface of a thickened liquid. If desired, the colors can be manipulated into different configurations by means of a stylus. The paper is then laid onto the surface, transferring both color and pattern to the page.

Other calligraphy tools include penknives, scissors, and small cutting boards called *maktas*, used when cutting pens, as well as burnishers for smoothing paper and gold.

Calligraphic works are decorated with illumination, or *tezhib*, using gold and gouache (opaque colors ground in water and a binding medium). The gold is usually prepared by pulverizing gold leaf to make ink, although sometimes the gold leaf itself is applied. Styles of illumination varied as times and tastes changed, from the delicate traceries of classical styles to the so-called baroque designs of the nineteenth century (fig. 12). From Şeyh Hamdullah's time on, the best Ottoman illumination can be characterized as simple and bold and in striking colors.



Figure 11  
Calligrapher's pens  
Reed, bamboo, wood, and java thorn  
Derman Collection, Istanbul

Figure 12  
 Sami Efendi (1838–1912)  
*Zer-entul levha*  
 Istanbul, Turkey, A.D. 1880/A.H. 1297  
*Celi sülüs* script  
 Gold on painted cardboard  
 19 1/8 x 28 1/2 in. (49 x 73 cm)  
 Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul  
 "It is almost as if those who reject  
 [God] would stab you [Muhammad]  
 with their stars when they hear the  
 Remembrance [the Qur'an] and say,  
 'Truly he [Muhammad] is insane.'  
 (Qur'an: 68, 51)



Figure 13  
 Kayışzade Hafız Osman Nuri Efendi (d. 1894)  
*Qur'an*  
 Istanbul, Turkey, A.D. 1873/A.H. 1290  
*Nesib* and *rika* scripts  
 Ink, colors, and gold on paper  
 6 1/4 x 9 1/16 in. (16.9 x 23 cm)  
 Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul  
*Serlevha* text: Sura 1, Fatiha, and the beginning of Sura 2,  
 Bakara, by one of the finest Ottoman copyists of the Qur'an.



The uses of calligraphy are as varied as the styles, but the primary application is the manuscript, especially the Qur'an, which was copied in its entirety as a single volume (*mushaf*) or in separate sections (*cüz*) used for memorization and recitation. The opening double-page spread of illumination found only in Qur'ans is called the *serlevha* (fig. 13).

Another common calligraphic work is the *kıta*, a small panel, generally a horizontal rectangle. A typical *kıta* (fig. 14) is composed of two scripts, usually *sülüs* and *nesih*. Another *kıta* format is for examples of the *ta'lik* script. The typical page is a vertical rectangle with four lines of writing placed horizontally or diagonally. The work is pasted onto a cardboard backing, and the empty spaces, called *koltuks* (literally, armpits), are often illuminated. The borders can be left plain, decorated with marbled paper, or illuminated. Styles of illumination include baroque (inspired by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European design), *balkari* (gold ink wash outlined in heavier gold), and *zer-efsan* (sprinkled gold). *Kıta*s can be compiled as albums called *murakkaas*, which can be assembled like books or accordions (figs. 15 and 16).

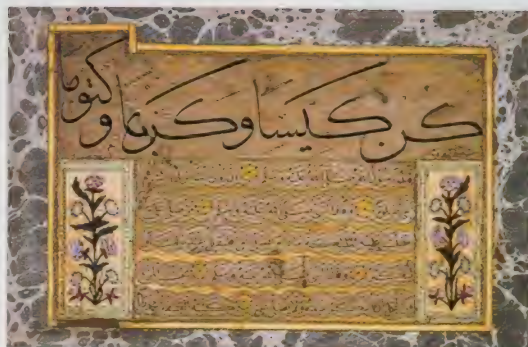


Figure 14  
Eğrikapılı Mehmed Rasim Efendi (1688–1736)  
*Kıta*  
Istanbul, Turkey, after 1727  
*Sülüs* and *nesih* scripts  
Ink, colors, and gold on paper mounted on cardboard  
6 1/2 x 9 1/2 in. (16.6 x 24.5 cm)  
Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul  
Top line, in *sülüs*: "Be sagacious, generous, and a keeper of secrets."



Figure 15  
Mehmed Hulusi Yazgan (1869–1940)  
*Murakkaa*  
Istanbul, Turkey, A.D. 1904/A.H. 1322  
*Ta'lik* script  
Ink and gold on paper mounted on cardboard, with *zer-efsan* (gold-flecked) borders  
9 13/16 x 6 1/4 in. (25 x 17.4 cm)  
Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul  
Album of *mürekkabat* (compound) exercises; the subject of this religious ode by the Persian poet 'Abd al-Rahman Jami is *basmala*

Other types of calligraphic works include the *levha*, or single panel of celi sülüs or celi ta'lik, which is intended to be framed and hung; the *bilye*, a levha that includes a written description of the Prophet Muhammad and is one of the most prized works of calligraphy (fig. 17); and the *istif*, a composition in which the letters interlace (fig. 18). A spectacular type of istif is the *müsenna*, in which the text is written backward and forward, with the left side reflecting the right. To replicate an istif, a stencil (*kalıp*) is made by piercing tiny holes along the contours of the writing. The composition is transferred to its final surface by pouncing the stencil with charcoal powder or chalk dust.

Of the nonpaper applications of calligraphy—which include ceramics, metalwork, and textiles among others—by far the most universally visible is its use in architectural or monumental settings. In the interiors of mosques, for example, calligraphy can be rendered in glazed tile, cut in marble in low relief, then painted and gilded, or simply painted in gold over a dark background directly onto the wall. The use of calligraphy in a mosque conveys a spiritual meaning to believers, a message that this place is dedicated to God. Similarly, the use of calligraphy on gravestones is a powerful reminder of the Islamic concept of a life well lived from beginning to end.

♦♦♦

In looking at a work of calligraphy, the experienced observer sees both writing and meaning, considered within the work's historical context. The observer is also, in a sense, witnessing the creative moment and sharing in the artist's struggle to "get it right," to honor traditional precedents, to rise to high standards, to meet both subjective and objective criteria for excellence.

The newcomer to calligraphy will observe first how the letters are shaped and connected. Are the strokes flowing and smooth? Are the letters crisp and not ragged? Is each line of text balanced in terms of dense and open letter placement? Do the lines have energy and vitality?

Now observe the page or composition as a whole. Is there a unity about it? Unlike Western art, a work of Islamic calligraphy should have no single focal point; rather, every part should have equal visual value.

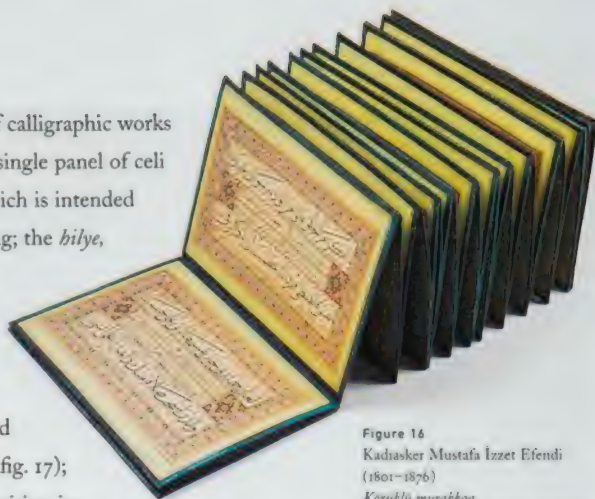


Figure 16  
Kadıasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi  
(1801–1876)  
*Koruklu murakkaa*  
Istanbul, Turkey, nineteenth century  
*Sülüs* and *nesih* scripts  
Ink, colors, and gold on paper  
7 1/4 x 10 1/4 in. (18.7 x 26.3 cm)  
Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul





Figure 17  
Hasan Rıza Efendi (1849–1920)  
*Hilye*  
Istanbul, Turkey, A.D. 1905/A.H. 1323  
*Celi sülüs* and *nesih* scripts  
Ink, colors, gold, and decoupage  
on paper mounted on cardboard  
41<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 28<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (107 x 73 cm)  
Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul

#### Text of the *Hilye*

Top line, in *celi sülüs* script:

*In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.*

Text in circular portion, in *nesih* script:

Transmitted from 'Alī [son-in-law of the Prophet], may God be pleased with him, who, when asked to describe the Prophet, peace be upon him, would say: He was not too tall nor too short. He was medium sized. His hair was not short and curly, nor was it lank, but in between. His face was not narrow, nor was it fully round, but there was a roundness to it. His skin was white. His eyes were black. He had long eye-lashes. He was big-boned and had wide shoulders. He had no body hair except in the middle of his chest. He had thick hands and feet. When he walked, he walked inclined, as if descending a slope. When he looked at someone, he looked at them in full face.

This section is surrounded by the names of the Prophet's principal companions, who were later to be the first four caliphs (successors): Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, and 'Alī.

The central line, in *celi sülüs* script, from the Qur'an:  
*And We [God] did not send you [Muhammad] except to be a mercy to the universe.*

Bottom section, in *nesih* script:

*Between his shoulders was the seal of prophecy, the sign that he was the last of the prophets. He was the most generous-hearted of men, the most truthful of them in speech, the most mild-tempered of them, and the noblest of them in lineage. Whoever saw him unexpectedly was in awe of him. And whoever associated with him familiarly loved him. Anyone who would describe him would say, I never saw, before him or after him, the like of him. Peace be upon him.*

This ends the text of the *Hilye*. It is traditionally followed by an invocation—O God, have mercy and give peace and blessings to the Prophet of mercy, the intercessor for his community, Muhammad, and his family and companions—and by the calligrapher's signature and the date.

Last line (not always included), in *celi sülüs* script:  
*If it were not for you [Muhammad], if it were not for you, I [God] would not have created the universe.*

Translated by Mohamed Zakariya



Figure 18

Çarşanbali Arif Bey (d. 1892)

*Levha*

Istanbul, Turkey, A.D. 1884/A.H. 1301

*İstif* in *celi sülüs* script

Colors on paper mounted on cardboard

20 1/2 x 28 1/2 in. (53 x 72.2 cm)

Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul

*"In it [the holy precinct in Mecca] are the clear signs [of God's guidance] and the place where Abraham stood to pray." (Qur'an: 3, 97)*



The illumination and decoration should harmonize with the calligraphy but not overpower it. Bad calligraphy cannot be saved by lavish illumination. Beautiful calligraphy can be troubled, but never ruined, by bad or inappropriate illumination.

Up until the eighteenth century, the evolution of Islamic illumination tended to involve refining and simplifying classic styles. In the mid-1700s, however, Ottoman illuminators began to adapt Western decorative principles for their own use, in a style that came to be known as Ottoman baroque or rococo. This style, though not widely appreciated today, can be genuinely effective, as can be seen in figs. 8, 10, 12, 17, and 18. In contemporary Turkey the baroque style has been abandoned for a style that harks back to the classical period in its delicacy and complexity.

The works represented in the Sabancı Collection, from which many of the illustrations in this publication are taken, exemplify the stylistic evolution of calligraphy as well as illumination. One of the most comprehensive private collections of Ottoman calligraphy in the world, the Sabancı Collection provides an opportunity to study the full range of Ottoman works, from the time of Şeyh Hamdullah to the twentieth century.

Language can prove to be a superficial barrier to enjoying Islamic calligraphy. Yet just as one can appreciate Italian opera without understanding Italian, so one can appreciate Islamic calligraphy without understanding Arabic, Turkish, Persian, or Urdu. Knowledge of the language and meaning enriches one's appreciation, of course, so a translation can be helpful. But much of the communication between artist and observer is on a deeper, wordless level. At its best, Islamic calligraphy creates a visual harmony that resonates within the spirit.

*Mohamed Zakariya is an American-born Islamic calligrapher who holds icazets in sülüs-nesih and ta'lik.*



## Glossary

The Turkish technical words used in calligraphy are the most comprehensive and accessible for both the specialist and the generalist. Although some of these terms are of Arabic or Persian origin, the Turkish form is given here. A note on the pronunciation of Turkish words:

c is pronounced j, as in jam

ç is pronounced ch, as in cheese

ğ is usually a silent letter

i is pronounced a, as in serial

ş is pronounced sh, as in ship

### *Besmele*

the first sentence in the Qur'an, "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful"

### *Celi*

scripts written larger than their normal size

### *Divit*

portable inkwell and penholder

### *Ebru*

Turkish marbled paper

### *Halkari*

"liquid gold work"; a type of illumination

### *Hat*

calligraphy

### *Hattat*

calligrapher

### *Hilye*

levha composed of a text describing the Prophet Muhammad

### *Hokka*

inkwell

### *İcazet*

permission or authorization

### *İcazetname*

document certifying the holder to practice as a professional

### *İstif*

composition in which the letters interlace

### *Kalem*

reed pen

### *Kalip*

stencil made by piercing the contours of a design with tiny holes; the design is reproduced by placing the kalip over a fresh sheet of paper and pouncing it with charcoal dust or chalk powder

### *Kit'a*

small calligraphic work, generally rectangular and generally using two scripts, one large and one small, or ta'lik script alone

### *Koltuk*

"armpit"; rectangular or triangular space in kit'as, levhas, and hilyes that allows for the arrangement of longer lines of a larger script with shorter lines of a smaller script

### *Körüklü murakkaa*

a calligraphic album in the form of a bellows or accordion

### *Levha*

calligraphic panel for large scripts, celi scripts, and istif

### *Lika*

wad of raw silk used in an inkwell to absorb ink

### *Makta*

pen-cutting slab

### *Meşk*

lesson or practice work

### *Murakkaa*

calligraphic album

### *Musbağ*

the Qur'an in a single volume, or codex

### *Serlevha*

symmetrical double page of illumination opening a Qur'an

### *Taklid*

imitation as a method of education

### *Tezhib*

the art of illumination

### *Zer-efsan*

gold flecks

### *Zer-endud*

painting in gold against a dark background

